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Middle East Brief

Intervention in Syria: Reconciling Moral Premises and Realistic Outcomes

Prof. Eva Bellin and Prof. Peter Krause

The situation in Syria is dire. The systematic savagery leveled by the Assad regime against its own citizens has sparked moral outrage and fueled calls for international intervention to stop the slaughter. But faced with the enormous cost of deploying troops on the ground in Syria as well as the likely ineffectiveness of a purely air-focused campaign, many analysts have backed away from the call for direct military intervention.

An increasing number favor indirect intervention focused on “evening the odds on the battlefield” by providing military and non-military assistance to opposition forces.¹ But this approach presents a fundamental disconnect between premise and outcome. The distillation of historical experience with civil war and insurgency, along with a sober reckoning of conditions on the ground in Syria, make clear that limited intervention of this sort will not serve the moral impulse that animates it. To the contrary, it is more likely to amplify the harm that it seeks to eliminate by prolonging a hurting stalemate. Instead this Brief highlights two other alternatives: choking the regime’s capacity for battle, and devising incentives to encourage regime elites to step down. These are the strategies that appear most likely to stop the bloodshed, even if they involve actions perceived by some as unsavory at best and unjust at worst.

Editors’ Note: While our Middle East Briefs are meant to provide policy relevant analyses of important regional issues, they are not ‘policy papers’ in that we normally avoid policy critiques or recommendations. The horrific scenes in today’s Syria and the terrible dilemmas they pose propel us to make an exception by presenting to our readers Prof. Bellin’s and Prof. Krause’s important and timely discussion of competing approaches to addressing the Syrian crisis.

Responding to Atrocities

The last twelve months have seen a mounting level of brutality leveled by the Assad regime against what began as a popular movement of peaceful protest. The regime's commission of atrocities has been staggering, beginning with the arrest, torture, and execution of schoolchildren in Daraa and quickly progressing to the indiscriminate shelling of towns and villages, the summary execution of opposition figures and their suspected sympathizers, the butchery of opposition figures' families and the rape of their women, and most recently, the massacre in Houla. Tens of thousands of Syrians have fled the country seeking refuge in neighboring Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. But even outside the country, these refugees have not been safe; in early April, Syrian forces fired across the border with Turkey, killing at least two people in a Turkish refugee camp. Inside Syria, citizens loosely grouped as the Free Syrian Army have taken up arms to fight Assad's security apparatus. Outside the maelstrom of slaughter, many of those witnessing the regime's crimes against humanity feel a moral imperative to act.

But despite shared moral intentions, observers have been divided on how to act.² The first impulse among many leading activists and scholars was to call for intervention with force. As some opinion makers in the U.S. argued: What is the point of having great power if that power is not used to great ends?³ A consortium of forces in the international community, it is argued, could easily demolish Assad's third-rate army, so why not step in and be done with it? But careful assessments of conditions on the ground have forced most sober analysts to retreat from this position. The Syrian military, while no match for the full firepower of the U.S. or NATO, is nevertheless not an insignificant force—and, more critically, it is enmeshed in densely populated civilian centers. To disarm it without inflicting huge human casualties would require not simply an air campaign, as was the case in Libya, but rather, by some estimates, two to three hundred thousand boots on the ground.⁴ Such force would be crucial to fully defeat the regime's security forces, enforce civil peace, and prevent the subsequent unleashing of retaliatory massacres by opposition groups. Furthermore, to have lasting impact, such an intervention would have to be prolonged and would require extensive investment in state-building, at great cost. Few countries have enthusiasm for such a course—certainly not the United States. Exhausted in the wake of its recent interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. is further conflicted about intervening in Syria due to its conflicting strategic interests in the country—the desire to see this “rogue” regime go countervailed by the fear that the fall of the Assad regime would give rise to a radical alternative and might even throw al-Qaeda a crucial lifeline.

Second thoughts about direct military intervention have led to consideration of a second approach, focused on “evening the odds” on the battlefield. If outside powers will not intervene directly, some observers suggest, the least the international community can do is help level the playing field by providing the opposition with arms. “People who are being massacred deserve to have the chance to defend themselves with weapons,” in the words of John McCain.⁵ Supporters of this strategy ask: What could be more morally unblemished than enabling people to exercise their right of self-defense? The danger, however, is that providing arms to the opposition will escalate the warfare and killing in Syria without ending it. Wary of being implicated in this violence, the Obama administration has thus far held back: It has limited its direct assistance to the provision of “non-lethal” aid, consisting of communications and intelligence

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support. And it has given a green light to other states (e.g., Qatar and Saudi Arabia) to assume the role of direct suppliers of arms and ammunition to the opposition, while assisting in the coordination of these efforts.⁶

This approach, focused on evening the odds on the battlefield in service to the larger goal of bringing down the Assad regime, is problematic for two reasons. First, it miscalculates the role that foreign assistance can play in enabling the success of insurgents. A brief review of the historical record on insurgencies and civil wars suggests that although such external assistance might help the Free Syrian Army avoid total defeat, it is unlikely to spell the end of the Assad regime or deliver victory to the opposition. Second, it ignores a fundamental disconnect between premise and outcome, assuming that bolstering the military position of the opposition will serve the moral objective of stopping the slaughter in Syria. Both assumptions are misguided.

Lessons from History

The historical record on insurgencies and civil wars suggests that most insurgent movements fail.⁷ Typically this is due to the disparity in resources available to the opposing sides, with established states generally enjoying an advantage in terms of well-organized militaries, heavy firepower, and deep financial pockets. But sometimes insurgencies triumph. Notable cases of insurgent success (e.g., that of the Vietcong over the U.S. in Vietnam [1973] and the Algerians over the French in Algeria [1962]) suggest some general lessons about the conditions that favor insurgency success vs. failure. These are relevant to our analysis of the Syrian case.

The most important asset that favors the success of insurgencies concerns the matter of *will*.⁸ Winning is determined by command of both tangible resources (men, arms, financial resources) as well as intangible ones (motivation, morale). Insurgents' success has often been traced to the edge they have in will, which confers a greater willingness to sacrifice for the cause. In the Vietnamese and Algerian cases, for example, superiority in will clearly favored the insurgents, inspiring them to fight on for years despite suffering casualties at a rate ten times greater than their opponent. In both cases, the insurgents were fighting for control of their homeland, their dignity, and their human rights; their opponents, by contrast, were fighting wars that were far from home and of questionable strategic importance.

Further compromising the resolve of the French and the Americans to defeat the Algerian and Vietnamese

insurgents was the fact that both countries were democracies. As Merom has argued, democracies rarely have the stomach for the long-term, brutal repression often required to suppress popular uprisings.⁹ Insurgents exploit this differential in will by adopting a strategy of victory through demoralization. Since they cannot defeat the enemy through direct confrontation on the battlefield, they embrace hit-and-run tactics with the intention of slowly bleeding the enemy, sapping its will to fight and ultimately persuading it to pull out in order to rid itself of the insurgent albatross.¹⁰

Besides an advantage in will, insurgent success is also linked to the command of broad popular support as well as possession of cohesive, visionary leadership. Broad popular support is essential to insurgent success, because the unconventional warfare tactics typically embraced by insurgents are acutely dependent on the loyalty and succor of the general population. The insurgents must be able to conduct hit-and-run operations against the enemy and then melt back into society if they are to be successful. Cohesive, visionary leadership, in turn, is indispensable to winning broad support by providing a compelling vision of an alternative future and is crucial for the effective organization and coordination of guerilla sorties. Think Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam.

What does this historical experience of insurgencies suggest for the Syrian case? Does the Syrian insurgency have the will to fight, and to sacrifice for the cause? Certainly. Dignity, justice, and human rights are at stake, not to mention the personal safety of the insurgents themselves; it is very clear to the insurgents that their backs are against the wall, and that if they don't prevail they face slaughter at the hands of the Assad regime. The problem is that, in contrast to the Algerian and Vietnamese cases, there is no "will deficit" on the part of the opponent. In contrast to the United States and France the Assad regime is not an outsider fighting a cause of questionable strategic value, with a distant home to return to and the personal survival of its government officials assured. To the contrary, the regime also has its back against the wall. The Assad regime has engaged in brutal behavior for decades, and this, together with the sectarian aspect of its domination and corruption, has fueled a lust for revenge among important segments of Syrian society—one that makes anything short of total victory mortally dangerous for regime elites.¹¹ Furthermore, unlike the United States and France, the Assad regime is not a democracy. Like other repressive dictatorships, it has long proven that it has the stomach for the savage repression of its opponents.

In short, in the Syrian case, the insurgents do *not* have an advantage in terms of will. In addition, the Syrian insurgency is sorely lacking in the other qualities that

have historically been associated with insurgent success: It does not have coherent leadership that can effectively coordinate its military operations, and it does not have a clear vision of the future that might inspire countrywide popular support. To the contrary, the insurgents are deeply divided and have multiple visions: Islamist, liberal democratic, socialist. Consequently, an important segment of the population continues to sit on the fence with regard to the insurgency. And mid-level military officers still fail to be sufficiently inspired by a vision (and the possibility) of an alternative future to defect in significant numbers.

Given these conditions, the Syrian insurgency does not appear well positioned to win any time soon. But failure to win does not spell utter defeat, either. Thus far the insurgents have persisted in their ability to hit and run, inflict pain on the regime, and still evade destruction. In so doing, they have been able to punish the regime for its brutality and raise the cost of Assad's repression. The receipt of aid from abroad, both lethal and non-lethal, will enable the insurgents to sustain this approach. It will not deliver victory to the insurgents, but it will bolster their prolonged punishment of the regime.

The hope is that such prolonged punishment will demoralize the regime and persuade it to negotiate a way out. But given the lack of a "will deficit" on the part of the regime, it seems likely that mutual punishment could go on for a very long time before either side gives up. The result would be neither victory nor defeat but a long, punishing stalemate, which is actually the most common outcome of modern insurgencies.¹² The provision of arms and assistance aimed at "evening the odds" on the battlefield will only ratchet up the level of violence and the cost in human life.

There are many historical examples of foreign assistance prolonging civil wars and insurgencies.¹³ Such intervention ends up subsidizing the cost of war and provides combatants with the resources and incentives to keep fighting long after it appears irrational to outsiders. One does not need to look far from Syria to find an example of foreign intervention enabling protracted conflict and countless horrors. The civil war in Lebanon persisted for fifteen years (1975–90) and resulted in over one hundred fifty thousand fatalities and many times that number in refugees, as well as massive destruction of the country. Why did that war persist? Largely because it could. Foreign powers such as the U.S., the Soviet Union, Syria, Israel, and Iran all picked sides and provided a steady supply of arms and aid that furnished the various militias with the capability and incentives to keep battering each other. No side could decisively win—but neither could any side be utterly defeated. The war came

to an end only when external factors (the demise of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War) spelled an end to Soviet and American patronage of the militias and persuaded the Great Powers to give Syria a green light to invade and put an end to the carnage though resorting to overwhelming force and occupation.

The Lebanese experience should damp down any expectation of a quick resolution to the Syrian conflict, especially if that conflict is stoked by foreign assistance. Further reason for pessimism with regard to a quick resolution of the conflict lies in the sectarian dimension of the conflict in Syria. Some of the longest-lived insurgencies in the world have been the North Caucasus insurgency in Russia, the Tuareg insurgency in Mali and Niger, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, ETA in Spain, and the Shining Path in Peru. Of these "insurgencies that refuse to die," four out of five had a sectarian/ethnic dimension driving them.¹⁴ Ethnic civil wars seem to have the greatest staying power, since people's uncompromising commitment to identity translates into there being no waning of will. The result is prolonged human suffering and ever more human casualties.

What this suggests is that a strategy aimed at "evening the odds on the battlefield" in Syria is unlikely to succeed if the goal is to put a stop to the slaughter of civilians. Rather, there is a clear disconnect between the motivating premise (end the carnage) and the likely outcome (increased carnage). Given the tendency of external assistance to prolong (but not decide) insurgencies such as Syria's, even offering "non-lethal" aid has highly lethal implications. As Marc Lynch has said about intervention elsewhere: Just because it is the just thing to do doesn't mean it is right.¹⁵ Measures that are just in intent can be deeply flawed in their consequences.

Two Alternative Strategies

Bearing witness to atrocity, the international community feels an obligation to respond. But in light of the deficiencies of "evening the odds on the battlefield," two other strategies that may prove more effective at achieving the goals of the international community merit consideration. The first involves choking the regime's capacity for battle; the second, structuring incentives so as to encourage regime elites to step down.

The Assad regime's capacity to carry on is already under extreme stress. Economically it faces severe difficulties. The Europeans have acquiesced to a boycott of Syrian oil exports. Tourism is moribund. The regime is running out of foreign exchange, and the deep pockets necessary to

finance an aggressive war are emptying out; the regime has managed to stay afloat in large part thanks to external assistance from Iran, China, and Russia. This choke point highlights the potential for an effective diplomatic strategy for the international community.

Iran has serious strategic interests in the survival of the Assad regime and so is unlikely to be persuaded to abandon it. But Iran's capacity to sustain the regime is limited given its own economic difficulties. By contrast, China's economic interests in Syria are not substantial; its support for the Assad regime stems primarily from irritation at U.S. moves in East Asia, along with a perceived stake in defending the principle that external forces ought not to intervene to settle the course of domestic conflicts. If it were isolated from Russian backing, China's stance could be budged. The key obstacle to choking the Syrian regime is Russian support, and here close attention to Russia's key concerns suggest the means for separating it from Assad. Russia has stood by the Assad regime for three reasons: to uphold the principle of "non-interference" in domestic insurgencies; to protect Russia's economic and military interests in Syria (control of Tartous; a market for Russian arms; the extension of Russian naval power in the region); and to assert Russia's standing as a great power in world affairs (even if that is measured simply by its ability to stick it in the eye of the United States).

If the international community wants to choke off Russian support, it has to take Russia's interests seriously and show Russia, as Steve Walt has suggested, that regime change in Syria will not compromise Russia's core interests. To the contrary, Russia needs to be persuaded that continuing to subsidize the Assad regime is much more dangerous for Russia, since prolonged civil war might very well lead to a collapse of the state and create a political vacuum in Syria that would not serve Russia's foreign policy interests. Not only might Russia be persuaded to give up opposing regime change in Syria; it might be encouraged to take the lead in overseeing such regime change—and even might be permitted to take credit for that outcome. By shepherding the process and taking ownership of regime change in Syria, Russia could protect its core economic and military interests and confirm its standing as a major power shaping world affairs. To this end, negotiations with the Syrian opposition could perhaps take place in Russia—or, if that is not possible, at least under Russian sponsorship.¹⁶

At the same time that the lifeline to the Assad regime is choked off, the international community could implement a second strategy: The incentive structure facing Bashar and his closest colleagues could be redesigned to persuade them all to bail out. An attractive asylum deal could be

devised (though one with a clear sell-by date) that would encourage the Syrian political elite to separate regime survival from personal survival.¹⁷ Offering asylum to Assad might be morally unsatisfying, but as Tunisia's President, Moncef Marzouki, said (when he offered the possibility of asylum in Tunisia): "Justice will not be served, but the life of the Syrians is more important than justice."¹⁸

There are significant precedents for the strategy of "buying out the butcher"—including the cases of Idi Amin, Jean-Claude Duvalier, and Ferdinand Marcos. And the international community would not have to limit this asylum offer to Bashar and his immediate family; it could be presented to all those most seriously implicated in the crimes of the regime—that is to say, those most jeopardized by regime change and most likely to be defiantly opposed to giving up. The fact that these cronies and their families might ultimately add up to more than just a handful of people would not necessarily be a deal breaker. After all, Israel (despite her small size) provided asylum to some two thousand soldiers from the South Lebanese Army (and their families) after Israel withdrew from Lebanon in mid-2000.¹⁹ The foundation of this strategy is the separation of the man Assad (and his cronies) from the governance of Syria. Under this approach, the man would go; the Syrian government would be reorganized through careful rehabilitation and inclusive political negotiation. These two strategies hold out the possibility, then, of responding to the moral imperative felt by the international community to end the humanitarian crisis in Syria without producing the unintended consequences that are the likely results of the direct and indirect military interventions championed by many activists and observers today.

Endnotes

- 1 For example, see John McCain, "It's Time to Arm Syria's Opposition," *The Telegraph*, May 31, 2012*; Andrew Tabler, "What the Hell Should We Do about Syria," *Foreign Policy*, May 30, 2012.
- 2 To be clear, both Syrians and international observers have suggested varied goals for intervening in Syria, including the creation of a democracy in the country or restructuring the balance of power in the Middle East. This Brief limits itself to analyzing whether intervention can achieve the objective of ending the human carnage in Syria, and if so, how.
- 3 For powerful statements along these lines, see, for example, Leon Wieseltier, "Damascus Calling: Why We Must Intervene in Syria," *The New Republic*, March 1, 2012; Fouad Ajami, "America's Syrian Abdication," *Wall Street Journal*, April 30, 2012.
- 4 Daniel Byman, Michael Doran, Kenneth Pollack, and Salman Shaikh, "Saving Syria: Assessing Options for Regime Change," *Middle East Memo* #21 (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, March 2012): p. 12.
- 5 Nour Malas, "Divisions Build on Syria Ahead of 'Friends' Meet," *Wall Street Journal*, February 20, 2012.
- 6 Karen DeYoung and Liz Sly, "Syrian Rebels Get influx of Arms with Gulf Neighbors' Money, U.S. Coordination," *Washington Post*, May 15, 2012.*
- 7 Jeffrey Record, "External Assistance and Enabling Of Insurgent Success," *Parameters*, 36, no.3 (2006): p. 36. We categorize the struggle led by the Syrian opposition as an insurgency on the basis of its correspondence with a classic definition of insurgency as "a protracted violent struggle by non-state actors to obtain their political objectives—often independence, greater autonomy, or subversion of existing authorities—against the current political authority" (Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson, "Rage against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars," *International Organization* 63, no. 1 (2009): p. 70. Given that the conflict has surpassed the classic benchmarks used to define civil wars (at least one thousand battle deaths, with at least one hundred casualties suffered on each side and with both warring sides focused on taking control of the country), there are grounds to draw certain insights from the dynamics of civil wars as well.
- 8 Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (1975).
- 9 Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). This is not to deny the extreme brutality that democracies have wreaked on insurgents. In the Algerian War, for example, the French carried on an eight-year war against Algerian independence fighters, resulting in the death of hundreds of thousands of people. In the end, however, the French people were exhausted, as well as repelled by the brutality of the war, and turned against the war.
- 10 Jeffrey Record, *Beating Goliath: Why Insurgencies Win* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2007); Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- 11 Joshua Landis, "The Syrian Uprising of 2011: Why the Assad Regime is Likely to Survive to 2013," *Middle East Policy Council* XIX:1 (February 2012).*
- 12 This point is further argued in Lyall and Wilson, "Rage against the Machines."
- 13 Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, "Dynamics of Civil War," PhD dissertation, Yale University, May 2012; Richard K. Betts, "The Delusion of Partial Intervention," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1994; Sarah Lischer, "Collateral Damage: Humanitarian Assistance as a Cause of Conflict," *International Security* 28:1 (Summer 2003): pp. 79–109.
- 14 Joshua Keating and Elizabeth Dickinson, "The List: Insurgencies That Refuse to Die," *Foreign Policy*, February 10, 2009.
- 15 Marc Lynch, "Give Annan's Syria Plan a Chance," *Foreign Policy*, April 24, 2012.*
- 16 Steve Walt, personal communication. Attempts to court the Russians and persuade them to abandon Assad have already been launched by, among others, President Obama, during his meeting with Prime Minister Medvedev at Camp David ("G-8 Summit Opens at Camp David, as Iran and Syria among Top Topics," *Associated Press*, May 19, 2012).* The limited success of these efforts so far does not negate the promise of this approach—especially if Walt's innovative strategy of "transferring ownership of regime change" is adopted.
- 17 As the slaughter continues to increase, this option will become less and less tenable for the Syrian people and the international community, who will want to see Assad and his cronies pay for their crimes, perhaps with their lives.
- 18 Habib Toumi, "Tunisia Ready to Grant Asylum to Bashar Al Assad," *Gulf News* February 29, 2012.*
- 19 Lebanon eventually permitted some of these soldiers to return home. Those that chose to remain in Israel were granted full citizenship as well as "a package of benefits equivalent to that given new immigrants to Israel." See Richard Edwards, "South Lebanese Army," in *The Encyclopedia of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Political, Social, and Military History*, ed. Spencer C. Tucker. Of course, the goal is not to re-create an intact Assad regime living "in waiting" abroad and thereby casting a cloud over rebuilding efforts in Syria; the goal is to lure the minimum number of ruling elites necessary to bring down the old regime.

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